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"Privileged Glimpses into the Human Heart": The Empathic Narratives of *Heart of Darkness* and *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract

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While comparative analyses of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* have repeatedly and fruitfully discussed similarities in their structure, theme, and characters, little has been written about the integral role that empathy plays in shaping both narratives. This essay draws on recent philosophical, psychological, and literary theories of empathy to analyze how Marlow and Nick's descriptions of empathic experience, displays of empathic behavior, and use empathy to imaginatively reconstruct others' experiences in narrative reveal that these narrators' engagement with empathy ultimately encourages readers to reflect on its functions and limitations as well as the nature of its relationship to story-telling. While Marlow and Nick criticize and at times condemn Kurtz and Gatsby they also identify and are drawn into ambivalent empathic relationships with Kurtz and Gatsby that allow them to understand and reconstruct the mental states of these men whose ideas conflict with the norms of their respective societies. Although the content and narrative method of Marlow and Nick's narratives reveal their capacity

for empathy, their retrospective and subjective empathic accounts are always mediated by their own beliefs, biases, and blind spots, and therefore their ability to empathize with others and accurately reconstruct others' mental states is limited. Nonetheless, these narrators display a capacity for empathy that, at least according to their own limited perspectives, is largely absent from the egocentric, narrow-minded, and prejudiced societies in which they find themselves. Ultimately, Nick and Marlow's empathic understanding of others, particularly Kurtz and Gatsby, inspires and enables them to construct narratives that critique the immoral and dehumanizing norms of their societies and speak to empathy's ability to provide humans with an awareness and understanding of others' experiences that can facilitate moral action.

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Just prior to writing what many would see as the greatest literary achievement of his career F. Scott Fitzgerald, according to his Introduction to the 1934 edition of *The Great Gatsby*, turned to Joseph Conrad's definition of art and the task of the artist, the "Preface" to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* Fitzgerald suggests that Conrad's "Preface" inspired his effort "to keep his artistic conscience…pure" while writing *Gatsby* and make the novel a successful "attempt at honesty of imagination," indicating that he adopted at least some of Conrad's artistic principles and strove to create a work of art that would meet Conrad's call to "render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe" ("Introduction" ix-x, "Preface" 458). Central to Conrad's conception is that through art the artist addresses our sense of shared humanity:

> [The artist] speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation; and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts: to that solidarity in dreams in joy in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living, and the living to the unborn. (459)

This point that art can speak to a "latent feeling of fellowship with all creation" is so vital to Conrad's artistic theory that he repeats a modified version of it several paragraphs later:

> In a single-minded attempt of that kind, if one be deserving and fortunate, one may perchance attain to such clearness of sincerity that at last the presented vision of regret or pity, of terror or mirth, shall awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity; of the solidarity of mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate—which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world (460)

Basic emotional and cognitive states provide common experiential ground that, when acknowledged, allow humans to understand and connect with each other. Art has the power to awaken our affective senses and alert us to this ability to feel with and understand each other. Although the word empathy was, according to Meghan Marie Hammond, coined in 1909, a

decade after Conrad published his Preface, Conrad's discussion of a "latent feeling of fellowship" or "solidarity" based in common emotional and cognitive experiences such as fear, hope, uncertainty, and dreaming resonates to a significant degree with contemporary conceptions of empathy (3).

Conrad's use of the word "solidarity" suggests that literature can and should awaken readers to shared emotional experiences, to the human capacity to feel with each other and understand others' emotional states. A number of critics have discussed Conrad's influence on Fitzgerald and analyzed similarities between their work, but none have given extensive attention to both authors' use of empathy in their fictional narratives. Conrad and Fitzgerald's works reveal a shared interest in the way that emotions, ideas, and experiences "bind men to each other" and create narratives that foreground empathic experience. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, works which feature empathy in strikingly similar ways, are tales focused on and constructed by their narrators' ambivalent empathic experiences. Charles Marlow and Nick Carraway have often and justifiably been characterized as socially detached, unreliable, and judgmental narrators, but both nonetheless display a capacity for empathy, and they are, in spite of their detachment, drawn into empathic relationships that compel them to recreate and express their empathic experiences through narrative. Nick and Marlow's narratives describe empathic experience, model empathic behavior, and employ empathy to imaginatively reconstruct others' experiences, and these narrators' engagement with empathy ultimately encourages readers to reflect on its functions and limitations as well as its relationship to story-telling.

Over the second half of the twentieth century, several scholars, including Robert Stallman, Robert Long, Peter Mallois, Donald Rude, and Jessica Martell and Zackary Vernon,

have created a significant body of criticism comparing the works of Conrad and Fitzgerald, and my analysis of empathy in *Heart of Darkness* and *The Great Gatsby* is informed by and builds upon this body of criticism. As Martell and Vernon point out, these comparative studies tend to identify and analyze similarities in the authors' narrative styles and, by extension, similarities in their character-narrators (61). Furthermore, the Marlow-Kurtz and Nick-Gatsby relationships are also often discussed together in light of their similarities. Long characterizes these relationships as defined by the narrators' "reluctant identification" with an "'isolate'" hero" whose imagination is juxtaposed with the "ethos of a particular society" (407). Stallman notes that both relationships are characterized by the narrators' loyalty to their protagonists which stems from their recognition of Kurtz and Gatsby's "fidelity to an idea" (7). Mallois writes that "Marlow's relation to Kurtz…is governed by a similar ambivalence" to that of Nick's ambivalence towards Gatsby (260).

The assignment of loyalty, ambivalence, and identification to the Marlow-Kurtz and Nick-Gatsby relationships rings true, but these analyses do not address the mechanism behind the development of those relationships, the process through which Marlow and Nick come, in spite of their ambivalence, to feel loyalty to and identify with Kurtz and Gatsby. Marlow and Nick are drawn into relationships with Kurtz and Gatsby because they empathize with them, and their empathy for and empathic experiences with these men drive their narratives. They identify, to a limited extent, with Kurtz and Gatsby, taking on Kurtz and Gatsby's subjective perspectives and sharing, again to a limited extent, their affective states. They use the insight they gain from this perspectival sharing of affect to construct narratives that strive to disclose their primary subjects' interiorities. The very act of narrating these tales involves the recreation of others' (particularly Kurtz and Gatsby's) affective and cognitive states and therefore relies upon Marlow and Nick's

empathic abilities. Thus, Conrad and Fitzgerald's narrators not only represent empathy in their narrative, they also model it as they narrate.

Long's observation regarding the juxtaposition of the "'isolate' hero" and the "ethos of a particular society" touches on another shared feature of these narratives: their concern with "the failure of contemporary society" (Long 407). Marlow and Nick's respective journey's through European imperialist controlled Africa and "the East" put them in contact with an array of characters whose beliefs, actions, and experiences reveal their participation in, contribution to, or victimization by deeply flawed societies. Empathy plays a significant role in these depictions of society as Marlow and Nick's empathic abilities distinguish them (at least in their own accounts) from characters who exemplify the social norms of European imperialist society (in both Africa and Europe) and the U.S. East, respectively.

The central flaw of both societies is that their citizens, particularly but not exclusively those with social status and privilege, frequently fail to value other humans' lives and subjective experiences. European imperialist society and the U.S. East are social landscapes that, by and large, lack empathy, a lack of empathy that contrasts starkly with the empathic relationships Marlow and Nick have with Kurtz and Gatsby. As Long suggests, Kurtz and Gatsby stand apart from these societies in ways that resonate with Marlow and Nick, and their narratives disclose their attempts to understand these men whom others fail to know and/or dismiss outright. Because their interest in and perception of these men's motivations, ideas, and emotional experiences provides them with a perspective that enables a critical understanding of social values and norms, empathy acts as the vehicle through which both narrators and readers access the novels' social critiques.

Essential to this discussion of empathy in *Heart of Darkness* and *The Great Gatsby* is an awareness and substantial analysis of the epistemological and empathic limits of each narrator. Marlow and Nick foreground their empathic experiences, but because we are limited to their retrospective accounts and by their ability to reconstruct the affective and cognitive states of others, the accuracy of their representations of others is suspect. Because Marlow and Nick's empathic accounts are always mediated by their own beliefs, biases, and blind spots their "tales are self-revelatory above all" (Friedman 109). Conrad and Fitzgerald highlight the limitations of their narrators' first-person perspective by creating inconsistencies in their narratives, specifically with regard to honesty. While I will frequently be discussing Marlow and Nick's narratives as modeling and describing empathy, the singularity of their narratives' perspective limits our understanding of their success at empathetic representation. Thus, it is more accurate to think of these narrators as describing and making attempts at empathy than as necessarily successfully empathizing.

Marlow is, of course, not the only narrator in *Heart of Darkness*: the unnamed frame narrator who introduces Marlow and comments on his tale delivers information crucial to understanding Marlow's tale in full. This frame narrator not only describes the highly significant setting in which Marlow tells his tale but also informs us how we might understand Marlow and his tale and is therefore an example of Umberto Eco's concept of the "model author" (15). According to Eco, the model author, an entity distinct from the "empirical author" (in this case Joseph Conrad), "Is a voice that…is manifested as a narrative strategy, as a set of instructions…which we have to follow when we decide to act as the model reader" (11, 15). The frame narrator provides readers with a set of instructions for reading Marlow's tale by saying "to [Marlow] the meaning of an episode [is] not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale

which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze" (3). While at times, such as when he discloses his desire to "convey the dream-sensation" to his listeners, Marlow describes his narrative strategy to his listeners, his explanations of his own narrative strategies are always modified by the initial set of reading instructions provided by the frame narrator (24). Unlike Marlow, Nick has sole control over the reading instructions for *The Great Gatsby*. He is at once a character, the narrator, and the model author of his book. Nick makes his authorship of *The Great Gatsby* explicit early on ("Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book"), and suggests how he has purposefully constructed his narrative to be read and understood in certain ways by stating his authorial intentions at various points in the novel, such as when he writes that he has "put [Gatsby's story] down here with idea of exploding those first wild rumors about his antecedents" (2, 101). While in *Heart of Darkness* we may refer to the frame narrator's commentary to gain a second perspective on Marlow's character and narrative, our understanding of Nick's character and narrative is derived entirely from our interpretation of his own language and perspective.

While it is important to note how the frame narrator's narration and Nick's authorship differentiate *Heart of Darkness* and *The Great Gatsby*'s narrative structures, my analysis will focus almost exclusively on Marlow and Nick's narratives because Marlow's narrative method resonates with Nick's narrative method in ways that the frame narrator's does not. Further, Marlow's narrative contains the details most relevant to an analysis of empathy in *Heart of Darkness* (including his empathic encounters with and description of Kurtz and several other characters). Although the frame narrator's commentary may alter our understanding of Kurtz's narrative, I see no reason to suspect that he alters Marlow's words and therefore assume that the frame narrator delivers Marlow's narrative to us verbatim.

Since empathy has been defined and used in a variety of ways, not all of which are compatible, my analysis of the relationship between empathy and narrative will benefit from a brief outline of the conceptions of empathy upon which it draws. Amy Coplan offers a strict but well-defined and useful definition:

> Under my proposed conceptualization, empathy is a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation. To say that empathy is 'complex' is to say that it is simultaneously a cognitive and affective process. To say that empathy is 'imaginative' is to say that it involves the representation of a target's states that are activated by, but not directly accessible through the observer's perception. And to say that empathy is a 'simulation' is to say that the observer replicates or reconstructs the target's experiences while maintaining a clear sense of self-other differentiation. (6)

Coplan's assertion that empathy is at once an essentially cognitive, affective, and imaginative process suggests that it may be central to a method of narration that strives to represent the cognitive and affective states of others. Alvin I. Goldman, who agrees that a kind of imagination is central to empathy, relates empathy to his simulation theory approach to mindreading which, put simply, holds that "people fix their targets' mental states by trying to replicate or emulate them" (*Simulating Minds* 4). Goldman contrasts mirror empathy with reconstructive empathy, defining the former as being produced by mirror neurons upon the perception of certain actions or expressions and the latter as coinciding with "mindreading another person's mental state," which "involves an attempt to replicate or re-experience the target's state via a constructive process" ("Two Routes to Empathy" 38). For Goldman, the empathizer "exploit[s] prior information about the target" to use "'enactment imagination' to reproduce in his own mind what might have transpired, or may be transpiring in the target" (38). As imaginative acts that strive to reconstruct the experiences of self and others, empathy and narrative may, in works like *Heart of Darkness* and *The Great Gatsby,* simultaneously inform and produce each other. The first-person

character narrators that Conrad and Fitzgerald create represent complex human subjectivities attempting to account for their experiences as well those of others, particularly Kurtz and Gatsby, relevant to their narrative. Marlow and Nick's "enactment imagination" works in tandem with their empathic knowledge of their subjects to create a narrative that strives to articulate these subjects' experiences. Of course, Marlow and Nick only create an empathic narrative because they have had and are compelled by the empathic experiences they describe. They combine powerful imaginative capacities with enough interest in and sensitivity to the experiences of others to provide an empathic rendering of their life-altering encounters with men who profess ideas in the midst of narrow-minded, self-involved, and unimaginative societies.

Why, we might then ask, is empathy, and by extension empathic narrative, important? In his discussion of empathy and narcissism, Mark Solms offers a formulation of empathy's value that claims that "we value empathic capacity morally. Feeling your way into the affective state of others (accurately) is a *good* thing. It is not only good *for* you; it is also good *of* you. Likewise, failing to feel someone's pain is bad" (99). Solms makes this assertion in light of the "theory of narcissism" which holds that "Since we aspire to be in pleasurable states as opposed to unpleasurable ones, the first conception of 'me' (of the place where my subjectivity intends to exist) is where the pleasure is; conversely, the place my subjectivity intends to avoid (the 'not me') is where the unpleasure is. In the beginning of ego development, therefore, 'me' coincides with pleasure and 'not me' with unpleasure" (101). This form of narcissism is, however, untenable because we must rely on entities and objects beyond ourselves (other humans, animals, water, food, etc.) to survive and "therefore have to allow some bad feelings to be relocated inside us (e.g., 'I feel hungry') and some good ones outside (e.g., 'she provides relief')" (102). Developing a "*receptive* attitude," one that seeks to attribute feelings accurately and explain their

causes, toward entities and objects outside ourselves opens us up to a host of "unwelcome feelings…such as lack, need and desire," and "locating pleasure in the other is apt also to arouse envy, just as finding pain there may arouse guilt" (102). Solms claims that to "tolerate such affects is to overcome narcissism," and because it directly opposes narcissism "empathy is considered good, both practically and morally" (102). While this framework's reduction of human emotions and conceptions of self to basic elements and relationships might fail to fully describe the characters and interpersonal relationships of *Heart of Darkness* and *The Great Gatsby*, it nonetheless speaks, as we shall see, to concepts important to both novels, namely that narcissism and empathy are opposed, and that while empathy may be flawed and limited, such an act is a moral step forward from pure egocentrism.

Ethics philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen's conception of empathy offers another argument for its moral value on the grounds that empathy enables humans to make correct moral judgements. Vetlesen argues that:

> empathy…contains a cognitive dimension by virtue of which it, and it alone, *discloses* to us something about another person—namely, his or her emotional experience in a given situation. Empathy is a necessary *prerequisite* for the development of an awareness and understanding of the emotions and feelings of another person. Significantly, becoming aware of another person's emotional experience is not the same as sharing the other's feeling, that is, as experiencing it oneself. What empathy basically facilitates is my reaching out toward the other person's situation. (204-205)

The act of reaching out toward another person's situation implies a desire to know and experience others' subjectivities. Without empathy and the desire to "perceive a situation where a cosubject's weal and woe is at stake," we may miss "the human dimension of a situation" and in doing so "remain blind to, indifferent to, unaffected by—its moral dimension" (210). Vetlesen argues that ultimately this "failure on the level of 'seeing,' or perception, undermines [one's]

ability to pass sound moral judgment about the situation in question," making the case that empathy has value because it enables humans to recognize each other's humanity and give the moral consideration that others deserve (210). Vetlesen's conception of empathy helps explain why becoming less narcissistic and more empathetic can be a step toward moral decision making, and helps us understand how certain characters' lack of empathy in *Heart of Darkness* and *The Great Gatsby* relates to their impaired moral judgement. Where Marlow and Nick at times reach out toward others and gain an awareness of their situations, few of those around them manage to do the same. In drawing this connection between empathy and morality I do not mean to suggest that empathy necessarily produces moral action or that moral people are necessarily empathetic. I, like Vetlesen, understand empathy as facilitating moral action by enhancing empathizers' ability recognize the "human dimension of a situation" and thereby increasing the likelihood that they fulfill the "moral obligation" placed on them by the "human reality of a situation involving the weal and woe of others" (Vetlesen 10). A lack of empathy does not prevent moral action, but it does make it more difficult for us to understand and acknowledge when and to what extent "the weal and woe of others" is at stake.

Thus far I have defined certain functions and capabilities of empathy, but equally important to this analysis are the limitations of, or problems associated with, empathy. Amy Coplan identifies two issues relevant to my discussion. First, empathy is particularly difficult to achieve when someone is "very different from ourselves, since the more unlike a target we are, the more difficult it is to reconstruct her subjective experiences. As a result, empathy is subject to biases based on one's familiarity and identification with a target individual" (13). Second, we may attempt to empathize but fail to differentiate the self from the other, attempting to understand others' situations based on our own perspective (how we would understand ourselves

in their circumstances) rather than their perspective (how they would understand themselves in their situation) and in doing so "lose our sense of self and become enmeshed or… let our imaginative process become contaminated by our self-perspective and thus end up engaged in a simulation that fails to replicate the experience of the other" (16). While "self-oriented perspective-taking" may at times improve our understanding of others and is "usually far better than experiencing the other in purely instrumental terms," it reduces our ability to accurately simulate and grasp others' experiences (13). Coplan's claim that humans tend toward self-oriented perspective-taking is echoed by Goldman's observation that humans tend to fail to "quarantine self-perspective" when attempting to simulate others' mental states. Instead they project their own characteristics and knowledge onto others, thereby preventing themselves from accurately understanding and/or predicting the mental states of others (*Simulating Minds* 172). Goldman acknowledges another challenge to empathy and enactment imagination when he states that the "prospects of successful correspondence" of cognitive and affective states between empathizer and subject are relatively "tenuous" because one needs "accurate and relevantly complete information about the prior mental states of the target" in order to correctly "extrapolate some further mental state" ("Two Routes to Empathy" 41). Thus, differences between empathizer and subject, an inability to distinguish and quarantine self-perspective from other-perspective, and a lack of knowledge of the other all pose significant difficulties to empathic relations. While Marlow and Nick's narratives display their empathic capabilities and experiences they also reveal that Marlow and Nick, limited at times by their subjective perspectives and the personal histories and ideologies that inform those perspectives, struggle to overcome these barriers to empathy.

The "solidarity…which binds together all humanity" that Conrad discusses, and that I have suggested resonates with our understanding of empathy, is also susceptible to a critique of empathy related to the limitations that Coplan and Goldman discuss. This line of critique, explored in greater detail in the "Contesting Empathy" chapter of Suzanne Keen's *Empathy and the Novel,* generally holds that would-be empathizers ultimately fail and/or do more harm in their empathic efforts because they ascribe to the belief that their experiences are universal or at least bear significant similarity to all other humans' experiences. The evidence gathered in psychological research suggests that only a modified version of this critique, one that accepts, or is at least open to accepting, the existence of universal emotional experience and expression, holds true. Scherer et al.'s review of the empirical evidence related to emotional universality and cultural specificity concludes that the studies they survey have consistently interpreted their data "as evidence for the universality of emotional expression" across cultures, but have also found a "notable ingroup advantage" in decoding emotional expressions (424-25). Scherer et al. evince an interactionist approach supported by these findings that holds that "Emotion expression and impression are determined by an interaction of psychobiological and sociocultural factors" (426). This interactionist approach coincides with Coplan and Goldman's suggestion that empathy, which involves successfully decoding emotional expressions, depends on one's knowledge of the target, an awareness of the limitations of that knowledge, and an ability to quarantine self-perspective. With adequate knowledge and proper self-other differentiation empathizers may be able to reconstruct an approximation (but never an exact replica) of another's affective and cognitive states, but they should be aware that the accuracy of such reconstruction tends to have an inverse relationship with the level of difference between the empathizer and subject. In venerating art's unifying capabilities, Conrad may be justified in evincing the universality of

certain human emotions and experiences, but he fails to acknowledge that differences in human emotion and experience created by a wide array of factors including race, gender, and culture are both numerous and significant. These differences, among other factors, make empathizing with another a precarious and limited endeavor, and an awareness of these limitations and challenges will enable us to better identify the gaps in Marlow and Nick's empathic experiences and narratives.

With these conceptions of empathy in mind we can begin to consider empathy in these two first-person narratives by exploring how empathy manifests in Marlow and Nick's process of narration. It is important that Marlow and Nick's narratives are presumably not fictional to them (even if we question the accuracy of some of their details). Conrad and Fitzgerald create storytellers who try to describe events, interactions, and emotions that they or someone they knew experienced. They use their perceptions, memory, and imagination to reconstruct and describe their and others' experiences. Because Nick and Marlow's narratives are in part composed of their imaginative interpretations of others' subjective experiences based on their perceptions of those others' vocal, verbal, and physical expressions, we may understand some of their attempts to reconstruct and describe certain experiences of others as relying on empathy and we may at times question the accuracy of their empathic experiences and reconstructions (i.e. whether or not their empathic simulations and reconstructions of others' cognitive and affective states approximate those others' actual cognitive and affective states).

Marlow and Nick's ability to empathize correlates directly to their ability to observe others and divine these others' affective states from their actions and expressions. Like most engaging narrators, they repeatedly describe the emotions of others as they are conveyed to them by these others' both verbally and non-verbally. For instance, Marlow tells his listeners aboard

The Nellie of the first-class agent's shifting affective states as Marlow "lets [him] run on" about Kurtz and his own professional prospects, saying that the first-class agent "had been planning to be assistant manager by and by under the present man, and I could see that the coming of that Kurtz had upset them both not a little" (23). Marlow then observes that "He was becoming confidential now, but I fancy my unresponsive attitude must have exasperated him at last, for he judged it necessary to inform me he feared neither God nor devil, let alone any mere man" (25). Marlow next notes that "He changed his manner; became very cold, and suddenly began to talk about a hippopotamus," and finally states that "He stood there for a moment in the moonlight with his delicate hooked nose set a little askew, and his mica eyes glittering without a wink, then, with a curt good night, he strode off. I could see he was disturbed and considerably puzzled, which made me feel more hopeful than I had been for days" (25). Marlow narrates himself translating the first-class agent's tone, facial expressions, and speech into a number of affective states including anger and disappointment ("upset them both not a little"), exasperation, vague disapproval ("very cold"), and disturbance and confusion. This tendency to track, categorize, and describe the emotional and mental states of others, which is characteristic of Marlow's style, recurs throughout his tale.

Nick's narrative style shares this tendency, as his descriptions of Daisy's expressions and emotions on his first visit to the Buchanans' mansion exemplifies. Nick writes that "Daisy took her face in her hands as if feeling its lovely shape, and her eyes moved gradually out into the velvet dusk. I saw what turbulent emotions possessed her, so I asked what I thought would be some sedative questions about her little girl" (16). Nick has observed and described Daisy's body language to explain the basis for his perception of her "turbulent emotions." He subsequently reports and interprets Daisy's verbal expression of these emotions: "'You see I think

everything's terrible anyhow, she went on in a convinced way. 'Everybody thinks so—the most advanced people. And I *know*. I've been everywhere and seen everything and done everything.' Her eyes flashed around her in a defiant way, rather like Tom's, and she laughed with thrilling scorn. 'Sophisticated—God, I'm sophisticated!'" (17). Nick perceives in Daisy's eyes and laugh the defiance and scorn she wishes to convey, but he immediately also feels the "basic insincerity of what she had said," and after waiting a moment he observes an "absolute smirk on her lovely face, as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged" (17). Nick, like Marlow portrays himself as having a keen enough eye for emotional expression with which he sees through facades and identify his subjects' actual emotional states. He is an emotional decoder skilled enough to both identify and then assess the sincerity of Daisy's defiance and scorn, and this assessment allows him to perceive her smirk and understand it as an expression of the satisfaction she gets from asserting her social status via worldly affect.

While these examples display Marlow and Nick's capacities for emotional decoding and description, both skills that facilitate empathy, they are not moments of fully realized empathy. Though both narrators perform the cognitive aspect of empathy, neither shares their subject's affect or tries to understand what it is like to feel the emotions they attribute to the first-class agent or Daisy. These examples do demonstrate, however, that these narrators are aware of and interested in the emotions and mental states of others, even those they do not particularly like, and that this awareness and investment makes its way into their narratives, causing them to render detailed emotional landscapes.

However, there are, as I have said, moments when Marlow and Nick attempt to reconstruct what it is like to think and feel as other characters do, and in these moments they

narrate empathically. The following passage, in which Marlow describes Kurtz's mental and emotional experiences and his prevention of Kurtz's escape, is an example of this empathic narration:

> I tried to break the spell—the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness—that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations…There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! he [sic] had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone, and I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air. I've been telling you what we said—repeating the phrases we pronounced—but what's the good? They were common everyday words—the familiar, vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life. But what of that? They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares. (61)

Marlow here reveals much more about Kurtz's cognitive and affective experiences than Kurtz ever appears to tell him. He reports relatively little verbal communication between himself and Kurtz, suggesting that Kurtz does not strive to explain his experiences to Marlow. Thus, Marlow can describe Kurtz's interior experiences because he is both a keen observer of emotional expression and because he, to some degree, shares and understands Kurtz's cognitive and affective states. He knows that Kurtz desires to return to the wilderness not simply because it has been the setting in which Kurtz has gratified his monstrous passions but because he has felt but resisted the spell he mentions on his own journey through the Congo and he can imagine how a man like Kurtz, an "unlawful soul" with aspirations, could be "beguiled" to monstrous gratification. He has seen the life Kurtz made for himself in the Congo and perceived the man's emotional expressions, and thereby come to understand Kurtz's specific sense of isolation and superiority. He then imagines what it is like to have such an understanding of one's self, and

expresses his imaginative reconstruction of Kurtz's subjective experience in language. Marlow's reporting the language he shared with Kurtz is insufficient to convey the nightmarish power of their encounter, and Marlow is compelled to reveal to his audience a more authentic version of their encounter, which includes describing what it was like to think and feel as Kurtz did in that moment. To do this Marlow relies on reconstructive empathy and reaches out towards Kurtz's affective and cognitive situation to simulate it in his imagination and then represent it in his narrative. The second half of this passage offers perhaps even clearer evidence of Marlow's empathic narration:

> Soul! If anybody ever struggled with a soul, I am the man. And I wasn't arguing with a lunatic either. Believe me or not, his intelligence was perfectly clear—concentrated, it is true, upon himself with horrible intensity, yet clear; and therein was my only chance—barring, of course, the killing him there and then, which wasn't so good, on account of unavoidable noise. But his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad. I had—for my sins, I suppose—to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself…He struggled with himself, too. I saw it—I heard it. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself. (61)

Marlow first ambiguously acknowledges his struggle with "a soul," likely meaning both his own and Kurtz's, which again suggests a sense of shared affect. He then reconstructs what it is like for Kurtz to examine his "soul," in other words his identity, actions, beliefs, and dispositions, using his knowledge of Kurtz and his own experience of going "through the ordeal of looking into it" to maddening and "horrible intensity" of Kurtz's isolated introspection. Marlow says he "saw [an] inconceivable mystery," but of course he could not have literally seen it. He has seen and heard Kurtz express himself and used these perceptions along with his personal experience to imaginatively replicate Kurtz's cognitive and affective experience in his own mind and

describe it to his listeners. That Marlow understands Kurtz's blind struggle with his soul to be a mystery is an acknowledgement of his own inability to understand and represent Kurtz's experience fully.

Nick performs a similar imaginative reenactment when he narrates Gatsby's past experiences. Gatsby tells Nick his story, but earlier Nick describes Gatsby as having "little to say," suggesting that Gatsby lacks the creativity and facility with language to articulate his past in the way that Nick's narrative does. Further, Nick is presumably not reporting Gatsby's version of his own story verbatim, because Nick quotes Gatsby directly when he wishes to do this (150). Thus, passages like the following result from empathic reconstruction:

> But his heart was in a constant, turbulent riot. The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night. A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the wash-stand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor. Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies until drowsiness closed down upon some vivid scene with an oblivious embrace. For a while these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing. (99)

Nick uses his knowledge of Gatsby's character and Gatsby's story to imaginatively feel with Gatsby and recreate in vivid detail Gatsby's turbulent, ambitious, and youthful interiority. Like Marlow, Nick not only describes his subject's emotions but also attempts to explain what it is like to feel and think as his subject does. To depict the Gatsby that he experienced, Nick assumes Gatsby's perspective to imagine and understand how Gatsby's imagination functioned in his youth and how it interacted with his emotions, acting as a comforting outlet for the "turbulent riot" in his ambition-filled heart. Nick uses his empathic narration to describe Daisy's past interiority as well, writing that "She was feeling the pressure of the world outside, and she wanted to see [Gatsby] and feel his presence beside her and be reassured she was doing the right

thing" (151). Again, Nick uses what he knows of Daisy to reconstruct her anxiety and longing with specificity, identifying the cause and nature of that anxiety ("the pressure of the world outside" in Gatsby's absence) and implying that her desire for Gatsby is caused not only simply by affection but also by her need for the reassurance his presence provides. Nick, like Marlow, relies on his empathic insight into others to construct a narrative that attempts to disclose the content of others' minds.

Having made this case for the role of empathy in Marlow and Nick's narrative method, I must acknowledge that empathic narrative faces all of the aforementioned challenges to empathy. If due to a lack of knowledge or a failure to quarantine their self-perspectives Marlow and Nick's attempts at empathy do not cause them to understand and represent the affective and cognitive states of others with at least a moderate degree of accuracy (perhaps they get the type of affect correct but not the degree), then their empathy fails. While Conrad and Fitzgerald provide plenty of evidence to suggest that Marlow and Nick are observant and skillful decoders of human emotional expressions, they also suggest that Marlow and Nick are inconsistent and possibly lacking in self-awareness. Perhaps most notably, both Marlow and Nick express beliefs about honesty and truth that they subsequently contradict. Marlow tells his audience, "You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies—which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world—what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do," yet his narrative concludes with his lie to the intended regarding Kurtz's last words (23). That Marlow fails to tell the truth despite his stated distaste for lies suggests that in certain circumstances he lies in spite of his desire to tell the truth. Thus, we have reason to question whether his empathic reconstruction manages to accurately represent

the people of his narrative, especially Kurtz. Nick writes that he is "one of the few honest people that [he] has ever known," yet he lies, or at least misrepresents himself at the novel's outset by telling his readers that he is "inclined to reserve all judgements" (59, 1). Nick also becomes complicit in a number of lies throughout his narrative, especially concerning both of the Buchanans' affairs. John Hilgart suggests that "Nick seems to go out of his way to make us a dubious audience," but it is difficult to tell just how aware of his inconsistencies Nick is. Nick is either much less concerned with telling the truth than he suggests or he is unaware of his own capacity for dishonesty. Either way we should be wary of trusting the accuracy of his representations of others.

Of course, the nature of Marlow and Nick's narratives prevents us from knowing with any degree of certainty how accurate their representations of others are (we have no other version of these tales to cross-reference), and therefore I am not sure that attempting to determine the accuracy of these representations would be productive. It may be more useful to consider what the uncertainty of their empathic narratives suggests about empathy and empathizers. While Marlow and Nick's inconsistencies raise questions regarding the accuracy of their empathy, they also highlight the potential for human error in attempts at empathy. That aspects of Marlow and Nick's narratives may be distorted or inconsistent draws our attention to their fallibility as empathizers and narrators. It is possible that Marlow fails to quarantine his self-perspective when he empathizes with Kurtz's desire to escape to the wilderness and that Nick lacks the knowledge necessary to empathize with Daisy's past self and accurately represent her feelings during Gatsby's absence, and their narratives draw our attention to these possibilities by revealing that Marlow and Nick at times misrepresent themselves and others. Since it is all too easy for would-be empathizers to make these kinds of errors, to believe that they have felt and understood what

others feel despite falling short due to their own bias or ignorance, Marlow and Nick's inability to avoid such errors in their empathic efforts makes them all the more realistic representations of empathic human narrators.

Although their narrative techniques rely on empathy, Marlow and Nick portray most of the people in their narratives as conspicuously lacking in empathy and having a disregard for others' lives and emotional experiences. The white imperialists of *Heart of Darkness* repeatedly display their lack of concern for others. These men whom Marlow ironically calls "pilgrims" give a"philanthropic pretense" for their presence in the Congo and Marlow tells us that their "only real feeling [is] a desire to get appointed to a trading post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages. They intrigued and slandered and hated each other only on that account" (21). Selfishness and greed make the pilgrims hostile to each other, but they also display a disturbing and abhorrent enthusiasm in their attempts to conduct what one calls a "glorious slaughter" of Africans with their rifles (47). Conrad conveys the pilgrim's racist, imperialist disregard for other humans' lives through their failure to recognize or care about the humanity of the African people they take pleasure in killing. This disregard for others is further displayed by the mustachioed pilgrim's response to the groans of a black worker beaten and likely wrongly blamed for setting a shed on fire: "Serve him right. Transgression—punishment—bang! Pitiless, pitiless. That's the only way" (22). "The Eldorado Exploring Expedition" which Marlow describes as "greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage" also exemplifies imperialist disdain for others (27). They aim "To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land…with no more moral purpose…than burglars breaking into a safe" (27). Furthermore, the African workers Marlow encounters, who are "dying slowly" of "disease and starvation," provide disturbing evidence that the imperialistic endeavor is both inhumane and

severely lacking in empathy. The imperialist enterprise Marlow describes consists of people for whom the experiences, well-being, suffering of others, especially but not only non-European others, matters little or not at all. Men like the pilgrims and the manager understand others merely as either instruments to use or barriers to be eliminated in the pursuit of plunder. This egocentric instrumentalism inhibits empathy because it disposes humans to value others primarily for their potential to be used for selfish gain and, by extension, to deny the existence of or, at least, the inherent value of others' subjective experience. Thus, the imperialists do exactly what Vetlesen suggests they might; they miss "the human dimension of a situation," and in doing so "remain blind to, indifferent to, unaffected by—its moral dimension" (210). They can kill African people and plunder their resources with impunity in part because they do not acknowledge or care to know their victims' subjective experiences.

Kurtz too displays a disturbing level of egocentric instrumentalism despite coming to the Congo intending to impose morality on the imperialist endeavor. Kurtz draws on ideas of white supremacist, European imperialism to argue in his report that Marlow finds "ominous" in retrospect: "we whites…'must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity…'By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded'" (45). But the coda to his report, "'Exterminate all the brutes!,'" and the heads on stakes just outside of and facing Kurtz's hut suggest that Kurtz's beliefs and ideas about morality turn to loathing, megalomaniacal killing, and rapacious ivory harvesting (46). Marlow says that "Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts" and that the wilderness "whispered to him things about himself which he did not know…and the whisper…echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core" (53). Kurtz and his moralist ideas reveal themselves to be vacuous when he confronts the people he

presumed he would westernize via his benevolent, deity-like "power." Kurtz's god-like conception of himself represents the kind of narcissism that, as Solms argues, prevents empathy. The racist and dehumanizing imperialist morality of Western Europe causes Kurtz to see himself as superior to the people of the Congo, a sense of superiority that prevents him from recognizing their humanity and valuing their subjective experiences. That none of the people, particularly Kurtz's Intended, Marlow encounters upon his return to the "sepulchral city," a place which he sees as populated by self-gratifying people "full of stupid importance" who do not know "the things [he knows]," know of or understand Kurtz's immorality suggests that Kurtz's hollowness is indeed a product and feature of their society (65-66).

The Americans of the materialistic society of "the East" display a similar egocentric lack of empathy, a self-serving "carelessness" that leads to deception, abuse, and death (Fitzgerald 179). Tom and, to a lesser degree, Daisy Buchanan, not originally from the East but well-bred and wealthy enough to enter freely into and become representative of the East's aristocracy, best exemplify the lack of concern for the lives and feelings of those around them. As Nick writes, they "smas[h] up things and creatures and then retrea[t] back into their money or their vast carelessness…and let other people clean up the mess they made" (179). Their extramarital affairs suggest that they do not much care about each other (though Daisy's affair with Gatsby is partially a response to Tom's multiple affairs), and the fallout of these affairs, the abandonment of their partners and the deaths of Gatsby and George and Myrtle Wilson, reveals the destructive force of their self-serving relationships. Daisy's failure to take responsibility for killing Myrtle and Tom's decision to set George on Gatsby further demonstrate that they see little value in the lives of others. Their privilege and wealth provides them with a classist and, at least in Tom's case, racist sense of superiority that causes them to care about their own desires, needs, and

emotions far more than anyone else's. Thus, their immoral actions are partially caused by either their failure to recognize that the "weal and woe" of others is at stake in their decisions or their failure to understand and fulfill the "moral obligation" that a situation involving "the weal and woe of others" places on them (Vetlesen 10).

While the Buchanans are a prominent example of egocentric carelessness, numerous other characters -- including Myrtle Wilson, Meyer Wolfsheim, Jordan Baker, and many of the party-goers whom Nick encounters, both those at Gatsby's house and those in New York, also display a self-serving disinterest in others. The party in Tom's apartment in New York consists of elaborate lies, "artificial laughter," and high-class pretensions that create superficial connections via shallow and disdainful conversations, such as Myrtle's scornful discussion of her husband's lack of wealth and class (36). Gatsby's partygoers reveal a similar level of superficiality and self-involvement as they collectively behave as if they were at "an amusement park," gratifying themselves on the resources of a man they do not know and, despite their interest in spreading provocative rumors about him, do not care to know until the party devolves into marital spats and drunken car crashes (41). The aftermath of Gatsby's murder reveals the primacy of self-interest over concern for others in the people of the East. Nick finds himself on "Gatsby's side and alone" watching as the media, law enforcement, and Catherine mischaracterize all George Wilson as mad. He mourns Gatsby while nearly everyone else, including Wolfsheim, perhaps Gatsby's closest associate, who knew Gatsby or gratified themselves at his parties cares too little to attend the murdered man's funeral (164). Finally, Jordan Baker's assertion that she does not have to be a careful driver because other drivers will be careful is perhaps the novel's most emblematic statement of societal carelessness. That her actions endanger people's lives and that she does not care enough to change her behavior reveals

that she lacks a sense of moral obligation concerning the well-being of those around her, or at least shifts that moral obligation onto others to preserve her own comfort. In their preoccupation with wealth, social status, and self-gratification through material consumption, the people of the East lack any significant desire to understand the cognitive and affective states of others; they therefore tend to understand others as instruments whose value derives primarily from the pleasure, status, or material goods they represent.

As Marlow and Nick reveal this societal lack of empathy and concurrent absence of moral concern, they also both describe life altering empathic experiences that reveal their interest in and capacity for understanding and feeling with others. But these narrators stand, as Nick writes, both "within and without" their respective societies, meaning that, while they demonstrate a capacity for empathy that others seem to lack, their empathy and interest in others are limited by societal biases and prejudices (35). Critics such as Long and Stallman have observed that both Marlow and Nick find themselves "'recipient[s] of confidences,'" and their receptiveness towards these "privileged glimpses into the human heart," their inclination to listen to, observe, and reflect on others' experiences, enables them to establish empathic connections with others that change their understanding of themselves and their societies and ultimately compel them to create these narratives (Long 418; Fitzgerald 2).

Marlow's empathy for Kurtz springs from both the recognition of both a shared belief in the power of ideas and the shared experience of navigating the African wilderness. It is telling that Kurtz comes imaginatively to life for Marlow "for the first time" when Marlow overhears that Kurtz, after canoeing a shipment of ivory three hundred miles upriver, returns to his station before reaching headquarters (28). Marlow speculates that Kurtz "turn[ed] his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home…setting his face towards the depths of the

wilderness, towards his empty and desolate station" because he is a "fine fellow who stuck to his work for its own sake" (28). He subsequently overhears the manager quoting Kurtz's assertion that "Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a center for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing" (29). Marlow's belief that Kurtz is self-sufficient, competent at navigating the wilderness, dedicated to his work, and committed to humanizing and improving native Africans according to European imperialist conceptions of humanity, civilization, and morality draws him towards Kurtz because Marlow, to some extent, desires, admires, and/or shares these traits. Marlow's distaste for the naked cruelty and greed of other imperialists and "enthusiasm" upon reading the "burning noble words" of Kurtz's report for the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" suggest his longing for and (at least initial) support of an imperialism that sees itself as committed to the improvement and humanization of native Africans. Kurtz's apparent commitment to this supposedly morally righteous form of imperialism, a commitment that no other imperialist that Marlow encounters expresses, resonates with and addresses Marlow's implicit desire for an imperialism that strives to do moral good (45-46). Both Kurtz's writing and reputation mark him as one who believes passionately that the imposition of European cultural and moral values can create "good practically unbounded" in Africa, and ultimately Marlow's initial implicit belief in the supremacy and importance of European cultural and moral values provides him with a sense of shared perspective that facilitates empathy towards Kurtz (45).

Of course, upon actually meeting Kurtz and seeing the "abominable terrors" wrought by his pursuit of self-gratification, Marlow ceases to imagine Kurtz as an uncompromised, hard-working idealist and sees him as "hollow at the core," a manifestation of "victorious corruption" (53, 57). Marlow sees in Kurtz's unrestrained greed and violence the failure and underlying

depravity of the imperialist morality of which Kurtz was thought by many (including himself) to be an ideal emissary. Thus, Marlow condemns Kurtz, but he does not dismiss him. His interest in and concern for Kurtz persists because Marlow relates to Kurtz's apparent "struggl[e]" to reconcile the violent and greedy madness of his soul (a madness that Marlow believes is caused by the intense self-reflection that the African wilderness provokes) with his concern for "right motives" and the remains of his belief in European imperialists' moral superiority and capacity to do "good practically unbounded" (63, 45).

As I suggested in my discussion of Marlow's empathic narration, Marlow empathizes with Kurtz's struggle with madness, because while traveling through the "strange" and "inscrutable" wilderness Marlow's "past [comes] back" to him in "the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream" (30). Marlow's experience suggests that being in an environment which defies comprehension and thereby denies mastery and comfort unsettles his identity as a white male European in a manner that incites disturbing introspection. Where Kurtz's disturbing introspection drives him mad, Marlow resists both introspection and madness by committing himself to "the work" of navigating the river, a form of practical self-distraction that avoids introspection by attending to "the mere incidents of the surface" (25, 30). While Marlow shares Kurtz's beliefs regarding imperialist morality and improvement, these ideas appear to be less fundamental to his sense of self or purpose than they are for Kurtz. As the fact that Kurtz is "intrusted" to write a report for the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" suggests, Kurtz travels to Africa to humanize and improve native Africans according to imperialist ideology, but Marlow travels to Africa primarily to work and pursue his "fascina[tion]" with the Congo (45, 6). While Marlow is able to focus his attention on his work to avoid considering the contradictions between his sense of identity, his conception of humanity

and morality, and his experience in Africa, Kurtz's attempt to impose imperialist ideology on native Africans forces him to confront these same contradictions. This confrontation via self-reflection causes him to discard any pretense of humanization or moral improvement and embrace his latent desire for power and self-gratification. Haunted by an inability to reconcile his past conception of himself with his experience in imperialist controlled Africa and fearing the deterioration of his own sanity Marlow comes to understand how a soul who believes in imperialist ideas of progress and morality could, upon "loo[king] within itself," go mad and abandon the semblance of moral behavior (61). Thus, Marlow, assuming that Kurtz's experience navigating the Congo is similar to his own, draws on this common experience to empathize with Kurtz and attempt, as I have shown, to understand and reconstruct Kurtz's cognitive and affective states.

Marlow also remains invested in Kurtz because he desires to hold on to his belief that an idealistic commitment to imperialist notions of humanization, improvement, and moral instruction can in some way redeem imperialist endeavors. As Marlow's early statement that only "an unselfish belief in the idea" can "redeem" the "conquest of the earth" suggests, he is reluctant to give up his belief that an idea-based imperialism can produce some kind of redemptive moral good even after his encounter with Kurtz, whose lofty ideas fail and arguably do more harm than the simple rapacity of other imperial agents (4). That Kurtz assigns idealistic and altruistic motivations to his imperialist endeavors at all, even if these motivations are misguided, destructive, and contradictory, is a primary reason why Marlow empathizes with Kurtz rather than the other imperial agents and why he makes Kurtz the "nightmare of [his] choice" (59). Yet because Marlow's narrative suggests that his belief that imperialism can be redeemed by ideas is ultimately incorrect, it seems that this early assertion is the product of self-

deceit. That Marlow "br[eaks] off" his speech after saying an idea is something you can "offer a sacrifice to," indicates that he is unable to fully explain how or why believing in ideas redeems the "conquest of the earth" and suggests that his experience with Kurtz (to whom Marlow believes disturbing sacrifices were offered) has caused him to doubt the truth of this statement even as he makes it (4). Marlow's uncertainty about the truth of this claim is partially responsible for the "inconclusive" nature of his tale because the content his tale contradicts his claim about idea-based imperialism, increasing his uncertainty as he discloses it and preventing him from making any conclusive attempt to redeem imperialism (5).

Thus, Marlow empathizes with Kurtz because they share certain beliefs and experiences related to being white European men who value lofty ideas about morality and human improvement within an imperialist enterprise in an unfamiliar and disorienting environment. Marlow feels a sense of "intimacy" with Kurtz and can imagine and, to a limited extent, explain what it was like to be Kurtz, and he does this most clearly when he explains his understanding of Kurtz's famous last words, "The horror! The horror!" (60, 64). Marlow observes and decodes Kurtz's dying emotional expressions, saying that he saw "the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair," and uses his understanding of these expressions to contextualize and imaginatively reconstruct the cognitive and affective experience Kurtz conveys in his ambiguous last words (64).

He begins by expressing his own ambivalent experience of "wrestl[ing] with death," and then draws on this experience to argue that it allows him to "understand better the meaning of [Kurtz's] stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness" (65). Marlow then expresses a strong sense of having shared Kurtz's mental experiences explaining

that “it is not [his] own extremity I remember best…No! It is [Marlow’s] extremity that I seem to have lived through,” (extremity here referring to their encounters with death) but acknowledges his experience was different because he “had been permitted to draw back [his] hesitating foot” (65). Nonetheless this complex combination of emotional decoding and experiential knowledge of death allows Marlow to conclude that while experiencing a “strange commingling of desire and hate” Kurtz makes a moral judgement of himself and presumably the imperialist enterprise in which he participated. Marlow sees Kurtz as experiencing a searing moment of clarity, a “glimps[e] [of] truth,” in which he sees and decries the immorality of his actions. Kurtz’s final words are to Marlow an “affirmation” that imperialist European society he has become a part of, contributed to, and created is horrific. That Marlow calls Kurtz’s judgement of his own corrupt actions and the destructive imperialist ideals and society he represents a “moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats” suggests that Kurtz’s horror resonates with Marlow’s feelings about Kurtz and other imperialists’ actions in Africa and fulfills Marlow’s desire to condemn those actions. Kurtz’s final words deepen and solidify Marlow’s empathic bond with him and are the reason “why [Marlow] remain[s] loyal to Kurtz to the last” (65). Thus, In what may be the most significant moment of the novel Marlow uses the limited facial and verbal expression that Kurtz gives him along with his knowledge of Kurtz and his own experiences to imaginatively reconstruct, feel, and attain an approximate understanding of Kurtz’s experience of his own final moments, and this understanding transforms his relationship with Kurtz.

Peter Brooks points out that Kurtz’s “cry” does not “fulfil[l] the conditions of the wisdom-and-truth-articulating function of the end” as Marlow claims it does (77). Brooks may be correct in observing that Kurtz;s dying words fail to articulate a summative statement and that “What stands at the heart of darkness…is unsayable, extralinguistic,” but the nature of the horror

in the heart of darkness may still be expressed and understood (78). Because Marlow attends to multiple modes of emotional expression (facial, tonal, and verbal being the relevant modes in this scene) and has developed an empathic bond with Kurtz he is able to attain a complex understanding of Kurtz's mental state without receiving a clear verbal articulation of it from Kurtz; he can, therefore, convey that understanding in a way that perhaps does not "make a mockery of storytelling and ethics" (77). Of course, as I have suggested, the accuracy of Marlow's complex empathic understanding of Kurtz's experience is uncertain; however, Marlow's understanding of the experience that Kurtz expresses in his final moments is not simply a product of fancy nor is it necessarily a misreading. It is the result of a deep desire to understand the experience of another, a desire that compels Marlow to deploy his knowledge of himself, Kurtz, and their shared experiences in order to verbalize his understanding of the affective and cognitive states behind Kurtz's "cry."

While Marlow empathizes with Kurtz more often and more naturally than he does with other characters, he also empathizes, to a limited extent, with the Africans he meets and works with on his journey. Marlow's description of the Africans seen from their steamboat displays a feeling of empathy struggling with dehumanizing European imperialist ideology:

> It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage—who can tell?—but truth—truth stripped of its cloak of time. Let the fool gape and shudder—the man knows, and can look on without a wink. But he must at least be as much of a man as these on the shore.

Despite initially considering the natives inhuman due to sharing a Eurocentric imperialist concept of what constitutes humanity, Marlow feels compelled to acknowledge his and their common humanity. That the display of this common humanity is "Ugly" to Marlow suggests that Marlow's indoctrinated belief in the supremacy of European culture causes him to understand this shared humanity as revealing something unappealing and unsettling in the human condition, including his own. The recognition of this shared humanity is unappealing, but it is also, and perhaps more significantly, unavoidable. A mature, honest, and unshrinking self-examination (one which Marlow associates particularly with masculinity) causes him to admit feeling "a response to the terrible frankness" of the African people he sees and "a suspicion of there being a meaning in it" that he can "comprehend." Thus, Marlow narrates himself experiencing here a kind of automatic or effortless affective and cognitive mirroring similar to the "mirror empathy" that Goldman describes. Recognizing the humanity of the natives, Marlow experiences an understanding, albeit a quite limited and distant understanding, of their cognitive states and sharing, again in a limited way, their affective states. Of course, Marlow cannot empathically reconstruct their mental states (nor does he actually try to do so) because he has only just begun to recognize their humanity and therefore lacks any detailed knowledge of their subjective experience. Marlow's reluctant adherence to a dehumanizing ideology inhibits his ability to empathize, but his sensitivity to and interest in the emotional expressions of others causes him to feel a kind of preliminary empathy that ultimately undermines this ideology and his assertion that belief in imperialistic ideas of morality and humanity can justify imperialism.

Marlow also expresses a more specific and defined connection with the helmsman and the cannibals aboard *The Nellie*, Africans with whom he has more direct contact. Just as he

observes and interprets Kurtz's dying expressions, he also observes and interprets the helmsman's dying moment, noting that the helmsman looks "as though he would presently put to us some question" and "frown[s] heavily and that frown gave his black death mask an inconceivably somber, brooding, and menacing expression" (42). Marlow again reveals an inner conflict between his ideologically determined conceptions of race and culture and his lived experience with Africans when he refers to the helmsman as "a help—an instrument" and subsequently describes the helmsman's dying look as one of "intimate profundity" that is "like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment" (46). As with Kurtz, Marlow reads the helmsman's facial expression to gain a vague understanding of the helmsman's final mental state. That Marlow describes the helmsman in instrumental terms and then retrospectively reads a claim of kinship in the helmsman's look suggests that the helmsman transitions for Marlow from a dehumanized tool to a humanized subject in his dying moment, and it is ultimately this change of perspective that causes Marlow to feel that Kurtz was not "worth the life we lost in getting to him" (46). Furthermore, when Marlow believes that the cannibal crewing *The Nellie* are starving, he says "Don't you know the devilry of lingering starvation, its exasperating torment, its black thoughts, its sombre and brooding ferocity? Well, I do. It takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly," drawing on his own experience to empathically reconstruct and represent their experience of starvation (38). Marlow again acknowledges an inclination to dismiss Africans as subhuman savages ("I would have just as soon expected restraint from a hyena"), but also expresses his admiration for and inability to understand their capacity for restraint (38). Marlow's ability to empathize with their experience of hunger causes him to his see his initial conception of the cannibals as false, and allows him to see these cannibals as exercising a restraint that Kurtz, the emissary of European culture and morality,

does not. Ultimately, Marlow's capacity for cross-racial and cross-cultural empathy, as limited by dehumanizing ideology as it is, allows him to better understand the meaning of Kurtz's last words, to comprehend more fully the extent of the violent and dehumanizing "horror!" that Kurtz and other imperialists enact.

Just as Marlow is drawn to Kurtz through the appeal of ideas which, though flawed and inhumane, express a misguided hope in a better future, so Nick comes to empathize with Gatsby based on the appeal of Gatsby's hope and his romantic belief in an "orgastic future" that recovers an idealized past (180). Nick prefaces his tale by expressing his disillusionment with world and his current disinterest in others' affective experience but he writes that Gatsby alone is "exempt from [this] reaction" and then offers a telling description of the man:

> If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. This responsiveness…was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again. No—Gatsby turned out all right at the end. (2)

As Nick's narrative (both its form and content) suggests, he shares to some extent Gatsby's "sensitivity to the promises of life" even if his experience in the East causes him to doubt the validity of life's promises. It is in fact his sensitivity to others and the "inexhaustible variety of life" as well as his own capacity for hope and romance that causes Nick ultimately to become disillusioned by the outcome of his time with the Buchanans, Jordan, and Gatsby (35). This shared sensitivity and readiness for romance is why Gatsby only "[comes] alive, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor," for Nick after he learns that his materiality and opulence are in the service of a romantic quest (78). Gatsby becomes a full subjectivity, one to be felt with and understood, only after he can be understood as pursuing an

"incorruptible dream" rather than "purposeless splendor" (154). Thus, as with Marlow and Kurtz, Nick's empathy for Gatsby is facilitated by a sense of similarity and shared experience.

Yet Nick's feelings for Gatsby, again like Marlow's for Kurtz, include dislike and measured condemnation. Nick makes no secret of the "unaffected scorn" he feels for Gatsby, although the exact reasons for his scorn are somewhat vague. Nick claims he is appalled by Gatsby's "sentimentality" (despite describing it in carefully chosen and beautiful language) and appears to disapprove of Gatsby's half-truths and his criminal career, but Gatsby is neither violent nor inhumane and Nick's disapproval of him seems to stem primarily from, as Scott Donaldson points out, his snobbishness and his tendency to be guided by "propriety" rather than "morality" (98). Where Marlow's ability to empathize is limited by his acceptance of racist, ethnocentric, and dehumanizing European imperialist ideology, Nick's is limited by a classist and egocentric disdain for others like that of the Buchanans and Jordan Baker. Nick portrays himself as wishing to avoid or struggling to establish deep emotional connections when he writes that he "feigned sleep" in the face of "intimate revelation" and explains that with regards to feeling love he is "slow-thinking and full of interior rules that act as brakes on [his] desires" (1, 58). His ironic suggestion that it would not at all "be a privilege to partake vicariously of [Tom, Gatsby, and Daisy's] emotions," however, implies an unavoidable tendency to feel what those around him are feeling and indicates that his avoidance of emotional connections may be a way of mitigating the emotional pain caused by his own sensitivity. Thus, despite his tendency to attend to and interpret the emotional expressions and states of others, he is at times reluctant and slow to feel with and for them.

Gatsby, however, facilitates Nick's empathic connection with him by attending to Nick's affective states and expressing his fondness for Nick. Nick and Gatsby's relationship, though

troubled by Nick's disdain and Gatsby's secrecy, is considerably more reciprocal than Marlow and Kurtz's. Gatsby's desire to establish an affective relationship with Nick characterized by mutual understanding and appreciation is apparent in several interactions between the two, including Gatsby's decision to confide his story and love for Daisy to Nick. Nick's description of Gatsby's smile conveys his perception of Gatsby's capacity for understanding, characterizing it as having a rare quality "of eternal reassurance" and "underst[anding] you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believ[ing] in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assur[ing] you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey" (48). While this description is hyperbolic, a self-aware rendering of his own exaggerated affective response to the smile, it nonetheless contains a kernel of truth about his experience of Gatsby. This smile reappears throughout the novel, and though at times Nick expresses suspicion regarding its sincerity, its final appearance after Nick affirms that Gatsby is "worth the whole damn bunch put together" once again conveys a poignant "understanding" of Nick's allegiance to and appreciation for him that proves in the end to be more valid than Nick initially judges it to be (154). Thus, Nick's interest in and empathic understanding of Gatsby is in part a response to Gatsby's interest in and possibly empathic understanding of him. Gatsby's ability to make Nick feel understood and reassured opens Nick up to the possibility of understanding and identifying with a man whom he disdains.

The end of Nick's narrative provides perhaps the strongest evidence of his transition to empathy as he feels "solidarity" with Gatsby and then ends the novel on a powerful note of empathic identification (165). When Nick finds himself alone on Gatsby's side he, as the only person left who knows virtually all of Gatsby's story, knows who wronged him and how, and also cares that Gatsby died having failed to realize his incorruptible dream, becomes Gatsby's

representative to the living. He experiences the world for and with Gatsby, and therefore feels the full emotional weight of the East's post-mortem abandonment of Gatsby and again judges the "rotten crowd" on both his and Gatsby's behalf. Furthermore, in his final moments in West Egg Nick puts himself in Gatsby's place both physically and imaginatively, sitting on the beach behind Gatsby's house, looking across the water, and thinking of Gatsby's experience of that same view. Nick writes that he "thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it," drawing on his knowledge of Gatsby's journey and his perception of Gatsby's reaching for the green light to reflect on what such a moment of promise, romance, and hope must have been like for Gatsby. Nick then switches his subject from Gatsby to first person plural in the line "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us," suggesting a powerful sense of shared affect between himself, Gatsby, and his readers in response to the common pursuit of an ever desirable and unobtainable dream-future. The novel culminates in a depiction of empathic experience (Nick narrating himself imagining what it was like to be Gatsby) that transitions into an implicit affective and cognitive identification of both audience and narrator with Gatsby, encouraging readers to empathize with Gatsby and Nick and, by doing so, experience the affective and cognitive states of understanding oneself as being "eluded" by an "orgastic future" (180). Nick's final narrative thrust is not just a statement about the nature of humanity but also an attempt to bring his readers into communion with his and Gatsby's experience of perpetually unfulfilled desire, to feel the very sense of human solidarity Conrad alludes to in his Preface.

Neither Conrad nor Fitzgerald conceives of empathy as solely facilitated by positive emotions such as affection, approbation, and admiration, but as resulting in part from the

recognition of shared affective and cognitive traits and tendencies. Empathy for Kurtz and Gatsby can occur only through the acknowledgement of their faults and immorality. Marlow must recognize that Kurtz is egomaniacal and self-gratifying just as Nick must recognize that Gatsby is delusional and detrimentally sentimental to understand and reconstruct their affective and cognitive experiences with even a modest level of accuracy.

However, Marlow and Nick's empathic capabilities are limited by whether or not they understand others as having traits, beliefs, and experiences similar to their own. They do not and perhaps cannot empathize with many of the characters they encounter, and while they are attentive to emotional expressions they do not often care to understand those who do not (at least in some fashion) share their values or their interests in ideas. Thus, characters like Tom Buchanan, the manager, or even Myrtle Wilson are depicted with little or no empathy. Further, both narrators (especially Marlow) fail, for the most part, to empathize with women. Though several women play prominent roles in his narrative, Marlow's patronizing assertion that women are "out of it—completely" and must be helped "to stay in that beautiful world of their own" reveals his belief in a significant and desirable divide between female and male experience (44). While Nick seems at times able to empathize with Daisy, he describes and seems to value his and Gatsby's cognitive and affective states significantly more than any female character's. For all their other-oriented sensitivity, neither narrator appears able or willing to relate to a female perspective in the same way that they relate to Kurtz and Gatsby's perspectives. Thus, while Marlow and Nick display (or at least portray themselves as having) a greater capacity for empathy than other people they encounter, their narratives also convey the limited scope of their empathic abilities and the rarity of empathic relationships like the ones they develop with Kurtz and Gatsby.

The unusual empathic nature and power of these experiences ultimately compel Marlow and Nick to reconstruct them in narratives that strive to allow both their audiences and themselves to imaginatively re-enter these experiences and thereby attempt to make sense of them. Marlow states his desire not to "excuse or even explain" his experience with Kurtz but to "account to [himself] for…the shade of Mr. Kurtz. This initiated wraith from the back of Nowhere honored me with its amazing confidence before it vanished altogether," suggesting that it is the surprising intimacy of their bond, Marlow's perception of experiencing Kurtz's interiority, that demands an account, a repackaging of experiential data in narrative, that allows him to relive and thus puzzle through his moments with Kurtz (45). Marlow's concern with whether or not his listeners "see [Kurtz]" or "the story" indicates that his narrative is an attempt to "convey the dream-sensation," the full cognitive and affective experience of time in the Congo, and particularly his encounter with Kurtz (24). Despite his conclusion that it is "impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence," an acknowledgment of narrative's limited ability to accurately convey experience, Marlow continues his attempt to do so, contradicting himself and revealing a lingering hope that his narrative will convey at least some meaningful approximation of the experience (24). Marlow here implies that his narrative is in part meant to enable his audience to empathize with and understand his experience, but he qualifies this aim by stressing the difficulty of empathizing with another via imaginative reconstruction.

While Nick's narrative is also an attempt to account for his experience of Gatsby, as indicated by the fact that it concludes with an explanation of why his empathic experience of Gatsby's experience is relevant to all of "us," it is also created with the intention of reviving Gatsby and, by extension, Nick's bond with Gatsby. Nick expresses his intention most clearly

when he relates Gatsby's infinitely hopeful and misguided belief in his own ability to "repeat the past," to realize his dream, and subsequently empathically narrates Gatsby and Daisy's kiss in the autumn moonlight, effectively reconstructing and, in a sense, repeating a moment of the past in which Gatsby's dream was as close to realization as it ever would be (110). Once again Nick presumably takes an experience about which Gatsby tells him and imaginatively reconstructs his interior experience, describing Gatsby's vision of being able to climb to a "secret place above the trees" where he could "gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder" and his knowledge "that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable vision to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God" (110). Despite considering Gatsby's description of this event as "appalling sentimentality," Nick's vivid, eloquent, and detailed reconstruction of the experience suggests that he is far from appalled in this moment of narration (110). Nick tries here as he does elsewhere to recapture Gatsby, to do for Gatsby what Gatsby believed he could do for himself, to prevent himself from again feeling that Gatsby is "too far away" to remember (174). For both Nick and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Marlow, empathic narrative breathes life into the dead by creating a narrative approximation of the men (essential to which is a rendering of their interior experiences) they once knew. Of course, reanimating these men through the use of their own perceptions and imaginative empathy can never result in anything more than an approximation that is skewed by and reflects the biases and limitations of their own minds. Thus, Nick's attempt to repeat the past ultimately represents as unobtainable a dream as Gatsby's own and writing a narrative that strives but fails to repeat the past is both a display of solidarity with Gatsby and Nick's testament to the universality of Gatsby's experience of desiring, striving, and failing to relive the past.

That the narratives of *Heart of Darkness* and *The Great Gatsby* critique the values and practices of the societies in which they are set (the imperial European society both in Europe and Africa and the society of the U.S. East respectively) has been well established by literary critics. These analyses (see Stallman, Long, Mallois, Rude, and Martell and Vernon) however, largely overlook the role that empathy plays in creating the novels' social critiques. Stallman writes that "In their unusual careers Kurtz and Gatsby become critics of their times; for if their imaginations take them 'out of bounds,' and they are defeated, they nevertheless reveal the greater failure of their societies, failing in the opposite and greater way in having no vision at all," which characterizes the nature of the novels' social critique as related to imagination or vision and acknowledges that the opposition between Kurtz and Gatsby and their respective societies provides the fertile ground from which social critique springs (416). I would amend Stallman's analysis to say that while Kurtz and Gatsby's careers and imaginations conflict with their societies' lack of vision, Marlow and Nick are the true critics of their times. They formulate and deliver social critique by constructing narratives that portray the conflict between Kurtz and Gatsby and their respective societies, and they are able to create such narratives because they gain an empathic understanding of Kurtz and Gatsby. Marlow and Nick can only understand and articulate the nature and stakes of the conflicts between Kurtz and Gatsby and their respective societies because they attend to and understand Kurtz and Gatsby's affective and cognitive experiences. Furthermore, that we are able to obtain a detailed (if biased) sense of Kurtz and Gatsby's beliefs, thoughts, and feelings, the cognitive and affective traits and experiences that differentiate them from their societies, also directly results from Marlow and Nick's empathy for them and ability to empathically reconstruct and articulate their mental states. As I have suggested, Marlow and Nick's attentive, other-oriented, and empathetic behavior offers an

antidote, if a limited one, to the egocentric failure to recognize the humanity of others exhibited by the societies of their narratives. Conrad and Fitzgerald suggest that the experience of identification with others through recognizing shared affective and cognitive experiences can inspire narratives that indict social practices through empathic understanding. Essentially Marlow and Nick critique their societies because they care enough about others' experiences (even those of men they criticize or condemn) to try to understand what it is like to be them, and this basic concern with the others' experiences alerts them to their own societies' pervasive disregard for others' lives.

Finally, while empathy enables social critique in these novels, it is ultimately an unstable platform from which to launch that critique. Both Conrad and Fitzgerald emphasize their empathetic narrators' abilities to represent themselves and others are limited by their perception and ideological biases. Marlow and Nick's narratives of their ambivalent and uncertain experiences of empathy are indeed "inconclusive": Marlow ends his caught between the darkness of his experience and the rottenness of the lie he tells the Intended and Nick ends his still striving to grasp the "orgastic future" and struggling to escape his past (*Heart of Darkness* 5, *The Great Gatsby* 180). While they acknowledge the faults of both Kurtz and Gatsby and their societies and choose what they perceive to be the lesser of the two evils that confront them, Marlow and Nick's empathic experiences do not ultimately provide them with a clear path towards social and moral progress. Even as their narratives critique their societies and condemn dehumanizing egocentrism, they are hindered by their societies' ideological biases and their imaginative reconstructions of others' lives are shaped and limited by these biases. Neither are they entirely free of egocentrism given that they believe enough in their own perceptions and imaginative interpretations of other people and events to portray them more often than not as fact. Marlow

and Nick's narratives are, in the end, ultimately stories about their *own* empathic experiences, and it is precisely because they perceive their own affective and cognitive experiences as shared and intertwined with the experiences of others that Marlow and Nick transform those experiences into narrative. Thus, this analysis of Conrad and Fitzgerald's novels reveals a paradoxical relationship between egocentrism, narrative, and empathy. While egocentrism may inhibit empathy and an inability to quarantine self-perspective may render it inaccurate, these same traits can be used to produce imaginative empathic personal narratives that reveal both the importance and limitations of empathy and ultimately strive to generate empathic experiences in those who encounter them.

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